DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 414 SO 014 300

AUTHOR Cortes, Carlos E.
TITLE Historians and the Media: Revising the Societal Curriculum of Ethnicity.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 8p.
JOURNAL CIT Federation Reports: Federation of Public Programs in the Humanities; v4 n1 Jan-Feb 1981

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiences; *Cultural Images; *Ethnic Groups; Film Production; Historiography; *History; *Mass Media; *Professional Development; Television

ABSTRACT

Because the media have a powerful and pervasive influence on the way all people perceive ethnic groups, historians need to become directly involved in media presentations. Historians have four general roles when working with the media: as researchers/writers, as media interviewees and commentators, as historical experts for media presentations, and as media creators. In the role of media creator the historian contributes his knowledge and understanding of the past, provides a larger context within which to frame the specific event being portrayed, and creates effective metaphors of the ethnic experience. However, historians, by the nature of their training, must be aware of their lack of media literacy, of the viewing audience (an audience which differs greatly from a reading audience), and of their own fascination with historical detail and insistence on total factual accuracy. Above all, historians must realize that audiences view productions with preconceived notions, particularly those concerning ethnicity. History is best served when the historian/media producer begins with his own vision of the experience he wishes to portray and then determines which elements of that experience communicates its essence. (Author/KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Carlos E. Cortes
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED222414

Historians and the Media: Revising the Societal Curriculum of Ethnicity*

by Carlos E. Cortés
1981

History is more than the story of the past—the who, what, when, where, and why of days gone by. It is also more than the recording, uncovering, and interpreting of that past, whether in writing by academics, journalists, community chroniclers, and other types of professional and nonprofessional historians, or orally through spoken tradition and music. History is also the dynamically and continuously bchanging collective memory of a people. The media have had a powerful influence on that memory, including how members of ethnic groups view their own past, how others view it, and how people view the significance of ethnic diversity in their nation's past, present, and future.

Collective memory is the product of education, both through the schools and through that parallel educational system, the "societal curriculum"—the massive, ongoing, informal curriculum of family, peer groups, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, occupations, mass media, and other socializing forces that "educate" all of us throughout our lives.[1] Much of this societal curriculum provides multicultural education, both positive and negative, about ethnicity, cultures, and foreign nations. Although not always cognizant of it, we are all constantly students of the multicultural societal curriculum, including public humanities projects.

The media—television, motion pictures, radio, magazines, and newspapers—serve as some of the most powerful, relentless educators within the societal curriculum. Expressed another way, all of us—before we enter school, during the time we are students, and throughout the rest of our lives—will "go to school" with the media. Take one example—television. One study reported that young people between the ages of 3 and 16 spend one sixth of their waking hours with the television set.[2] According to another estimate, by the time of graduation, the average high school senior will have spent 12,000 hours in the classroom and 15,000 hours in front of the television set. In other words, teachers may trail the tube in direct contact hours by 20 percent ... and television is only one component of the media curriculum.

Moreover, that curriculum extends beyond those aspects of the media which purport to present facts and interpretations—news magazines, newspapers, radio and television newscasts, and documentary films. In addition, the so-called "entertainment media," such as feature films and television series, also have a powerful impact in shaping beliefs, attitudes, values, perceptions, and "knowledge" and influencing decisions and actions.[3] Even advertising, through patterns of depicting selected roles for persons of different societal groups, has helped to mold public expectations and a sense of what is acceptable and "normal" (and, therefore, also what is "abnormal") in society.[4]

Among the topics covered by the media curriculum is, of course, ethnicity. For tens of millions of people in the United States, the mass media will be their total, or at least their primary, curriculum on ethnic groups and foreign nations. Sometimes media even outweigh personal experience as an educator. One study reported that white children believed that TV comedies like *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Son* accurately portrayed black family life, even though these same children admitted that the shows contrasted with personal experiences with their own black friends ... whom they labeled as exceptions.[5]

The scope, power, and pervasiveness of the media curriculum on ethnicity present a challenge, not only for media professionals, but also for the community at large, including historians.[6] Specifically, historians must be constantly aware that their teaching and writing occur within the societal context of this parallel and often competing

---

Dr. Cortés is Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside. He spoke at the 1980 National Meeting of State Humanities Programs on "Addressing Diversity with Creativity." Named Distinguished California Humanist of 1980 by the California Council for the Humanities, he has written numerous articles and books about ethnicity.

*The author wishes to thank Laurel Cortés, Alan Curl and Roger Hayes for their insightful comments on a preliminary draft of this paper.

[1] Carlos Cortés, 1980

SP 014 300

media educational system. But awareness is not enough, nor is simply criticizing the media. If we really care about influencing the nation's collective memory about the perceptions of ethnic groups, we need to become directly involved in the shaping of that media curriculum.

Historians and the Media: Four Roles

To date, historians have played four general roles vis-a-vis the mass media—as researchers and writers of history, as media interviewees and commentators, as historical experts for media productions, and as media creators. In each of these roles, historians can contribute. However, it is in the fourth role—as media creators—that historians can have their greatest impact on the media process of shaping collective memory. (A caveat at this point. Obviously there is diversity among historians as there is within any group. Therefore, when I use the term historians, I will be describing general tendencies, not absolutes. So please avoid the mental insertion of the word "all" before the word "historians" or, for that matter, any other group of people.)

Historian as researcher and writer—a necessity if the history of ethnicity is to be uncovered, the omissions of historical literature corrected, and common distortions rectified. Written history—documents, reconstructions of the past, and constantly-changing interpretations in books and journals—serves as a source from which the media can draw. However, when historians function solely in this research-writer (as well as teacher) role, they relinquish to others total control over the translation of history into the mass media, particularly the visual media.

Historian as media interviewee and commentator—an important role, but a relatively passive one. Usually this occurs when a newspaper or magazine interviews a historian to furnish "background" for a hot contemporary topic, when a radio or television station asks a historian to appear on a panel, or occasionally when a historian is asked to provide commentary and thereby scholarly "legitimacy" as part of a documentary film. Sometimes the role is a bit more active and less reactive, as when a historian writes a "think piece" for a newspaper or magazine. Such mechanisms serve as partial transition between the historian as researcher and historian as full participant in the media, but in the interviewee-commentator role the historian still has relatively little impact.

Historian as historical expert for media productions—a role of exceptional ambivalence, in which historians can help or hinder. Usually this role is played in the area of general, school, or television documentary films. As experts (or better yet, as those with special knowledge about particular topics), historians provide a service by contributing to factual and sometimes interpretative accuracy. However, such historians still have little to do with the overall shaping of the film, serving merely as furnishers of information and reactors to the ideas of media people. Moreover, if historians become lost in the quest for "completeness" of detail and the search for historical hairs to split, they may actually handcuff a production. Many well-intended media productions, both documentaries and feature films, have become so mired in details that the focus becomes diffused, the film ineffective, and the audience dispersed. Historians and media people, much as surgeons, should not feel happy about successful operations and dead patients, even if the patients are merely drowned-in-detail celluloid or videotape. The eternal challenge—how to achieve that dynamic balance between detail and metaphor, between accuracy of parts and veracity of the whole—will not be met successfully and consistently until historians become more involved in the fourth role, as media creators.

Historian as media creator—the role which more historians need to accept if they are to truly contribute to the media curriculum's shaping of the ethnic and national collective memory. This does not necessarily mean that the historian must become a film producer or director, but it does mean that, when becoming involved with media productions, the historian must move beyond the role of historical expert into that of actual shaper of material. It is precisely when historians with some knowledge of the media process and media people with a true concern for the public significance of the transmitted past become partners in creation that the media can provide their most effective societal service.

Contributions of the Historian

What can the historian, specifically the historian concerned with the media curriculum on ethnicity, contribute in the role of creator? At least four basic, interrelated contributions—knowledge, understanding, context, and metaphor.

Knowledge—While neither the embodiment of knowledge nor a limitless reservoir of facts, the historian knows where to find information about the past, what has been written on various topics, and whom to consult about special areas. But to combine knowledge with creativity, the historian needs to understand the nature of the different media in order to be able to cull that knowledge selectively and draw from it those aspects which translate most effectively in media terms.

Understanding—In a world which is suffering from factual overload and is experiencing a dramatic knowledge explosion, the historian can contribute by providing greater understanding of those facts and that knowledge. A filmmaker can uncover facts about the past, but few people have so immersed themselves in the past, as have historians, that they can provide a broad interpretation

of the meaning of those facts. Moreover, by training the historian should be eternally critical and thereby can assist media people by filtering out factual errors in historical sources, challenging even widely-accepted historical analyses, and providing alternate interpretations of the past. Facts require interpretation. The facts about the history of immigration do not themselves provide an understanding of immigration. The facts about famous ethnic leaders do not themselves reveal the historical significance of their actions or provide historical understanding. The historian can suggest interpretations of facts. But in the special role of media creator, the historian must contend not only with the meaning of the past, but also with the problem of how that meaning can best be translated into the special language of the media in terms which the audience can comprehend.

> "... to what degree should a historian involved in media productions 'insist' on total factual accuracy?"

Context—Even beyond the understanding of the specific, the historian (or at least the good historian) should have a grasp of the larger historical panorama in which the specific occurs. As in the case of facts, the historian has no special access to that larger context. The issue is primarily one of time. The historian spends a lifetime studying that context, and media people should take advantage of that experience. A widespread weakness of media productions about history—be they feature films or documentaries—is the failure to link specific events or phenomena to their larger national and world context. This process is fraught with danger, of course, because a balance must be sought between the establishment of context and the focus on the specific, so that the resulting media production is both comprehensible and captivating. How have changes in the world or national economic picture differentially affected members of different ethnic groups? How should the history of the depiction of individual ethnic groups in the mass media be reinterpreted in the context of the larger history of the media and its changing stance toward ethnic groups in general and toward world events?[7] In the special role of media creator, the historian should bring a vision of how to present and relate that context effectively without diffusing the focal topic or confusing the intended audience.

Metaphor—It is in this area that the historian may come closest to being a true media creator. While educational researchers still debate "learning theory," there is one area of total agreement. People forget. They forget rapidly and selectively. No matter how cogent the documentary, how emotionally affecting the feature film, or how beautifully conceived the written word, the viewer, listener, and reader will forget much of the content of a communication. The historian's concern, like that of any effective media communicator, must be to enhance the possibilities that audiences will comprehend, retain, and be affected by the main messages. This is where metaphor comes in. Along with the presentation of facts, the interpretation of the past, and the creation of meaningful context, the "mediate" historian should seek to create effective metaphors of the ethnic experience—metaphors of conquest, immigration, social struggle, assimilation, acculturation, and cultural maintenance. Powerful metaphors will likely remain long after viewers or readers have forgotten facts.

Problems of Historians as Media Partners

So much for the good news. Now for the bad. Media people beware. By training, often even by constitution, historians may not generally make good media partners. In the area of mass media, there are four basic problem areas for historians—lack of "mediacy," excessive fascination with detail, inability to separate factual from metaphorical reality, and lack of awareness of audience. Let us look at these one at a time, with a special focus on the area of filmmaking as an example.

Lack of mediacy (media literacy) — Historians generally lack knowledge of the craft, special language, and means of communication of the mass media, particularly films and television. Written history is by nature static, analytic, and contemplative. It is to be read slowly, to be re-read at will, and ultimately to be placed on the shelf for reference. In written history, although the overall vision and interpretation will necessarily reflect the author's subjectivity, the historian must be concerned with the accuracy of the facts marshalled in defense of that interpretation.

Filmed history, in contrast, reflects the very nature of the visual media—dynamic, synthetic, and emotive. It does not permit the viewer the opportunity to go back, re-view, examine for details, or, for that matter, even have the time to observe all of the details as they race by. Where written history demands concern for the accuracy of all parts *as parts* (as well as for the whole), filmed history demands concern for the parts mainly as contributors to the truth and impact of the whole. The *effectiveness* and veracity of a film is derived from its overall impact, not the accuracy of its parts.

Moreover, the development of mediacy demands

more than reassessing the relationship of parts and whole. It also demands the transition from thinking in words alone to thinking in images and music, as well as in words. This includes learning to think from images or music to words, rather than necessarily using words as the starting point of all sequences. The depressing results of the "words-as-the-only-starting-point" approach can be seen in so many documentary films which are really little more than illustrated spoken textbooks, with all of the resulting tedium and lack of impact. Being trained as a writing historian, then, may sometimes serve as an obstacle to becoming an effective filmic historian.

Fascination with historical detail—When handled by an artist, such as Martin Ritt, historical detail can enrich a viewing experience. However, when the creation of detail becomes a goal unto itself, it can burden a production, as well as suffocate a vewing experience, as Michael Cimino has apparently done in the just-opened-just-closed *Heaven's Gate*. To be effective in the media, the historian must balance the quest for period accuracy with the search for a successful total product. When accuracy of detail can be attained without massively overburdening a production or ballooning costs, it is a valid goal. However, a spirit of compromise must constantly reign, and the historian must be willing to sacrifice detail for pragmatic reasons.

There also comes a point when the issue is no longer one of detail but of actual substance. Here the spirit of historical compromise becomes both critical and elusive. Stated most bluntly, to what degree should a historican involved in media prductions "insist" on total factual accuracy and to what degree should the historian be willing to compromise such accuracy in favor of larger considerations? Let us use a film of mine as a case in point.

In the documentary film, *Northwest from Tumacácori*, which I co-authored and co-produced, (and which is similar in intent to many films supported by grants from state humanities councils) we attempted to re-create the 1775-1776 Anza expedition and the founding of San Francisco. Our goal was to create an experiential film by maintaining a subjective focus from the perspectives of expedition members looking out toward the world, in order to try to place viewers "within" the expedition.[8] In one set of sequences, as the expedition moved up the California coast from mission to mission, we chose to photograph the California missions as they currently exist, rather than look for more modest structures which more closely resembled the missions at that time. Our rationale was that, for the modern viewer, the image of the larger missions would provide greater verisimilitude to the feeling of succor that the humble missions of the 1770s must have given to Anza and his tired followers after a long day's march.

For most audiences, this filmic technique works, as reflected in post-film discussions. Moreover, audiences usually react with comments about the film's overall mood, feeling, and impact. One exception—historians. When I show the film to groups of historians, they usually react not to the film's mood or metaphors, but instead zero right in on "historical errors," such as the missions. After all, why enjoy the forest when you've got some good trees to go after? The issue here is not the correctness or incorrectness of our decision, but rather the unfortunate tendency of historians to ignore the whole for the parts.

Insistence on total factual accuracy—Admittedly, historians (or filmmakers) are on "safer" grounds. Historians who establish their roles as Defenders of the Sacred Facts and thereby leave the necessary creative compromises to the filmmakers may score points with their professional colleagues, but are they really contributing to the film or, for that matter, to historical understanding? I think not, particularly if this rigid position impedes veracious synthesis, judicious shaping, viewer comprehension, and the effective development of historical understanding.

Clearly fact and historical detail should not be disregarded, but the historian who leaves all compromises to the filmmaker is neglecting a responsibility. Part of writing history is choice. Through selection, omission, and synthesis the historian necessarily distorts. The correctness of all facts in a book does not negate the "fact" that historians choose what facts to include and exclude. Compromises are constantly made in writing, and historians should bring to filmmakers their experience of compromise in recreating the past. Historians should not obdurately resist factual compromise or even be passive respondents to the filmmaker's compromises. Rather, recognizing that the dynamic, telescopic, and highly synthetic nature of film necessitates compromise, historians should actively search for, recommend, and shape those compromises with the goal of maintaining overall historical veracity. Dangerous ground, I realize, but necessary ground if the historian is to become an effective media creator. Obviously, once you leave the safe ground of factual truth and enter the arena of selection and adaptation, you must deal with the constant dilemma of when and how.

Lack of awareness of audience—Historians need to learn to consider viewing audiences just as, in theory, they have learned to write for different reading audiences. At one level, this is a technical matter linked to the issue of mediacy. How does the way audiences view and listen affect the way a theme must be presented in film?

But in the case of ethnic groups the issue of audience goes well beyond technocracy. It also involves a consideration of what "knowledge" about ethnic groups the audience brings to the viewing experience. And here we have come full circle to the

issue of the historical media curriculum on ethnicity.

Viewers do not come to the movie house or watch a television program in a vacuum. They bring with them their own cultural baggage—knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, including knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about ethnic groups. The historian, in fact, all media people, need to consider these factors in the process of creating. Failing to do this may well lead to a film which provokes reactions far different than the filmmaker intended, an issue which is particularly critical in ethnic-subject films.

A classic example is Francis Ford Coppola's great film, *The Godfather,* an extraordinary Insider's vision of a slice of Italian-American life. Many Italian Americans reacted negatively to the film because of its emphasis on violence, which they felt reinforced the Italian-American mafioso stereotype. As a result, when *The Godfather Saga* was shown on NBC, it was preceded by the ineffective disclaimer:

> *The Godfather* is a fictional account of a small group of ruthless criminals. It would be erroneous and unfair to suggest that they are representative of any particular ethnic group.

Who was right, Coppola or the protesters? Probably both. As an Insider, starting with Mario Puso's novel, Coppola created a personal portrait of aspects of Italian-American society, in which violence was one component. Careful viewers should discover the film's rich matrices of significance, such as its commentaries on alternative ethnic legal systems, the role of the press in society, and the importance of the Italian family, as well as its extraordinary critical metaphors of U.S. corporate business. Yet the protesters were also correct, in that casual viewers, not privileged to Coppola's experience and insights, not aware of his metaphors, and already burdened with stereotypes about Italian Americans, probably had those beliefs firmly reinforced by the film.

Once a film is completed and shown, the filmmaker loses control and the audience takes over. And if audiences draw from the film something the creator did not intend, it is too late to lament. The audience is now in charge. This peril is hypertrophied in films about ethnic groups, where audiences are almost certain to bring their prejudices and "knowledge" to the viewing experience. Moreover, as *The Godfather* reveals, the Insider runs a special risk in the process of communication with the audience. When an Insider makes a film about an ethnic group, she or he may be even more divorced from the audiences' perspectives (unless, of course, the film is being made of the group, by the group, and exclusively for the group). This problem occurred not only in *The Godfather,* but also in such films as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Super Fly.* Whatever their intentions or artistic qualities, the films probably reinforced stereotypes.

Moreover, there is double jeopardy (and, therefore, increased responsibility) when the filmmaker is a member of The Group (whatever the group) depicted by the film. When an Outsider makes a film about The Group, The Group can criticize it as the work of someone who doesn't really know the territory. But when an Insider makes the film, it not only gives the film increased legitimacy with the viewing audience, but also makes it much more difficult for others to attenuate any negative impact or audience "misinterpretation."

Historians and filmmakers must face the fact that audiences are not viewing their productions with a *tabula rasa* absence of mind set. Viewers are already products of a pervasive media curriculum on ethnicity. As scholars of society, historians need to step into the shoes of the audience, try to predict the probable impact of their own film-in-progress on different viewers, and then modify the films with a consideration for those audiences.

A vicious circle, yes. Audiences with cultural baggage partially created by the historical media curriculum on ethnic groups. Historians and other media people trying to alter that media curriculum and at the same time restricted by the very cultural baggage of the audiences. A puzzlement, yes! But a puzzlement too socially significant to be ignored. While we may rue much of the past media curriculum, it is up to historians and media people to work together to alter that curriculum in the future and soften its deleterious impact.

> "... the historian has built from a knowledge of facts to develop a vision of an ethnic group's experience."

Possibly one way to address this dilemma is to reach one final time into the historian's bag of tricks. As historians we learn to collect facts, interpret them, develop from them our vision of a historical era or phenomenon, and then shape the facts and interpretations in written form in order to express our vision (although, unfortunately, some contemporary pseudo-historians develop their "models" without regard for facts and then merely look for evidence which is useful for defending their "models"). Why not apply this thinking to the media? Hopefully the historian has built from a knowledge of facts to develop a vision of an ethnic group's experience. The historian, then, should start from this vision—a conception of that experience—and then look for those topics which

help to communicate the essence of that experience.

Maybe the problem with most media person-historian collaborations is that they have evolved from the asking of the wrong questions. Maybe in the future we should set aside the normal starting question, what are the aspects of a group's experience which would make good films or television productions? Instead let us ask the more vital question, what is our vision of that experience? Once this is answered, we can then ask what are the elements of that experience which, when filmed, would effectively communicate that essence, taking into consideration the nature of film and television, probable audience attitudes, and the influence of the other components of the media curriculum? Maybe, then, we will enrich both the nature of our collaboration and, along with it, the nature of our society.

NOTES

[1]Carlos E. Cortés, "The Societal Curriculum and the School Curriculum: Allies or Antagonists?," *Educational Leadership*, XXXVI, 7 (April, 1979), pp. 475-479.

[2]Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker, *Television in the Lives of Our Children* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 12.

[3]Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975); Robert Singer and Robert Kazdon (eds.), *Television and Social Behavior. Journal of Social Issues*, XXXII (Fall, 1976).

[4]Thomas M. Martinez, "Advertising and Racism: The Case of the Mexican American," *El Grito. A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*, II (Summer, 1969), pp. 3-13; James D. Culley and Rex Bennett, "Selling Women, Selling Blacks," *Journal of Communication*, XXVI (Autumn, 1976), pp. 160-174.

[5]Bradley S. Greenberg, "Children's Reactions to TV Blacks," *Journalism Quarterly*, XLIX (Spring, 1972), pp. 5-14.

[6]Carlos E. Cortes, "Hispanics in the Media and the Impact on Public Policy: A Humanistic Perspective," in Virginia Correa-Jones, Alfredo Benavides and Miguel A. Terán: *The Hispanics: A Missing Link in Public Policy* (Des Moines: Spanish-Speaking People's Commission of Iowa, 1980), pp 29-35; for suggestions for other media-related action see Carlos E. Cortes, "The Media Curriculum on Mexican Americans: Educational Challenge for the 80s," (speech delivered at convention of the Association of Mexican American Educators in Los Angeles on November 16, 1979).

[7]I address this issue in my book-in-progress on the history of the themes of ethnicity and foreignness in U.S. motion pictures.

[8]Carlos E. Cortés and R. Alex Campbell, *"Northwest from Tumacácori:* An Experiment in Experiential Documentary Film" in Robert Smetherman, (ed.), *The Politics of Culture. Proceedings of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies, October 23-25, 1975*, Vol. V (1976), pp. 135-138.

Federation Reports

Federation of Public Programs in the Humanities
Volume IV, Number 1 January/February 1981

8

7